

the connected adolescent: transitioning to **middle school**

Adolescents who feel connected to school and perceive the adults there to be caring are more likely to be academically and socially engaged. Here's how to foster that connection.

The research is clear on the importance of student connectedness to school. When students believe the adults at their school genuinely care about them as individuals and care about their learning, they are more engaged and more likely to be academically successful.

Middle school is a critical time for students to feel connected to school, but these grade levels present greater challenges to all of us working to foster student connectedness. It is well documented that the transition from elementary to middle school is a time when students feel less attached to school, and their perception of caring adults at school drops significantly (Search Institute, 2006).

Students who are disconnected in school report more incidents of maltreatment such as harassment from their peers (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer & Perry, 2003). Adolescence is a time when peer relationships become more important, and those relation-

ships can positively or negatively impact a student's behavior and feelings about school (McNeely & Falci, 2004).

The good news is that those who participate in extra-curricular activities, receive high grades, and do not skip school feel more attached to school (McNeely, 2002). Furthermore, adolescents who feel connected to school and perceive their teachers as fair and caring are less likely to participate in health-risk behaviors such as tobacco, alcohol or marijuana use, sexual activity, violence, or suicidal thoughts (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Search Institute, 2006).

But what does it mean for a student to feel connected to his or her school community? At Terman Middle School in Palo Alto Unified School District this is a data-driven question. In the fall of 2010, Palo Alto Unified School District partnered with Project Cornerstone to conduct a survey that among

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other indices measured school climate and student achievement. This survey was rooted in Search Institute's Developmental Assets framework, which identifies 41 assets as building blocks for youth development.

While 86 percent of our students reported feeling bonded to school and 80 percent reported being aware of school boundaries (both strong predictors of academic achievement), only 47 percent reported being in a caring school climate. These results inform our work with students at different levels ranging from classroom practices to school-wide programs, including transition to middle school.

We have identified three focus areas critical to fostering student connectedness to school: transitions to middle school, student support systems, and program elements that include an effective anti-bullying effort. There is a cultural mind set shared by all adults on campus of genuinely caring about individual student needs, whether they are academic, social or emotional.

Teachers as leaders

There is a district-wide commitment to collaboration and encouragement of teacher leadership and professional development. Teacher leaders in the core subject areas at each secondary site observe and coach their subject-area peers around classroom management and instruction. They collaborate monthly across schools and are members of their own school site leadership teams, where they play an important role in maintaining high professional standards and moving their school forward in efforts around continuous improvement.

At the school site, collaboration time is built into the master schedule and school calendar so that daily, weekly and monthly collaboration can take place among teacher teams, within departments, across grade levels, and across curricular subjects.

Students are assigned to core subject teacher teams, and these teachers meet weekly in a common collaboration period, along with the grade-level counselor and special education resource teacher. These meetings are student centered and focused on both academic and socio-emotional concerns around any student. Teachers share

upcoming assignments and test schedules to avoid overloading students with long-term assignments and tests. These team meetings are facilitated by a team leader, and agendas with student names and follow-up plans and dates are used to prevent any student concerns from falling off the radar.

Student leadership roles

Students serve in developmentally appropriate leadership roles at the school. Student council representatives are elected at all three grade levels, with officers elected from

the eighth-grade level. They meet weekly at lunchtime, and with teacher support, plan and carry out spirit activities such as dances and lunchtime games.

Students in the eighth-grade Leadership class (a semester elective) take an active role as leaders and role models for the entire school. Eighth graders can also volunteer to become TASK students (Tigers Achieving Social Kindness), leaders in our campus-wide Social Kindness Program. Two students serve on the School Site Council (a seventh grader and eighth grader), where they

Program elements that support student connectedness



At the heart of our school is our **mission statement**, which formally affirms our commitment to high academic and social standards, and our core values around inclusiveness and respect for diversity. This mission statement is the driving force behind discussions, collaborations, decisions and programs. Any proposed changes, questions, or issues around programs in place are first viewed through the lens of our mission statement.

Grade-level counselors provide the critical connection to school for our students. Middle school is a stage marked by physical, social and emotional changes for students. At Terman, grade-

level counselors not only support and advocate for students as they navigate the unique demands of middle school, they also work with the teachers to support student success. In addition, they design and implement the Social Kindness Program at Terman that aims to foster an inclusive school climate. A unique highlight of the counseling support is that the students have the same counselor through all grade levels at Terman. This helps strengthen the relationship with students and families, and provides a single point of contact for them as they journey through middle school.

School climate is at the core of creating a positive bond between a student and school. Counselors and teachers develop lesson plans taught during advisory periods. Themes include: creating a harmonious school community; anti-bullying, name-calling and stereotyping; cyber-safety; and strengthening the staff-student bond.

Activities are interspersed throughout the school year and include TASK students hosting a lunch for students new to the school district, anti-bullying and cyber-safety lessons, promoting across-grade interactions through playing non-competitive board games, and the very popular staff-student games (football, basketball, volleyball) that help students view staff members in a fun and friendly light.

Lunchtime connection and engagement opportunities for students include clubs that are student initiated and staff sponsored. The clubs provide a great avenue for students to connect around common interest areas. With an asset-based focus on empowering students and creating a strong student-school bond, these programs have resulted in considerable improvement in school climate.

— Katherine Baker and Bhavna Narula

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Transition to middle school

The transition model at Terman focuses on creating an early connection to school for students and families. Our experience has shown that the earlier we facilitate this connection, the stronger it is, which in turn impacts students' motivation to learn.

Beginning in the spring of the previous school year, the principal and the counselor, along with a group of eighth-graders, visit each feeder elementary school to talk with fifth-graders. Topics range from activities in middle school to expectations.

The goal is to have fifth graders connect a real "face" to middle school (dispelling some myths that exist about what middle school would be like), and to begin making connections to Terman. This forum allows fifth graders to ask questions in a comfortable setting – their own elementary school – and gives an opportunity for interaction with eighth graders, their new grade-level counselor, and their new principal.

Forming a learning community

In May of their fifth-grade year, classes from all the feeder schools take a field trip to their new middle school, where they are greeted by students, counselors, administrators and teachers, and are given tours of the campus by current sixth graders. These fifth graders get to meet the other students who will make up their cohort in the fall. The visiting students spend time in sixth grade classrooms and have opportunities to ask questions of teachers and students.

Spring and summer are packed with gathering input from fifth grade teachers and parents, and planning for Tiger Camp, a unique transition camp for all sixth graders that runs for the first week of school. This camp focuses on connecting students with the adults around them and with each other as they begin to form a community that maximizes learning and development.

The students are placed in random color groups and rotate through all the sixth grade teachers during the course of the week. Activities include benchmark assessments, school orientation, community-building

activities, and introduction to student leadership groups.

At the end of the week, teachers use multiple data points (teacher observations, input cards from fifth grade teachers and parents, and counselor input) to create balanced, heterogeneous classes. Student and parent feedback is used each year to refine the camp for the following year. A lot of student friendships begin with, "He/She was in my group in Tiger Camp!" Students feel more connected to all sixth grade teachers and not just their core teachers, which provides an additional layer of bonding to school.

Measuring results: What the surveys say

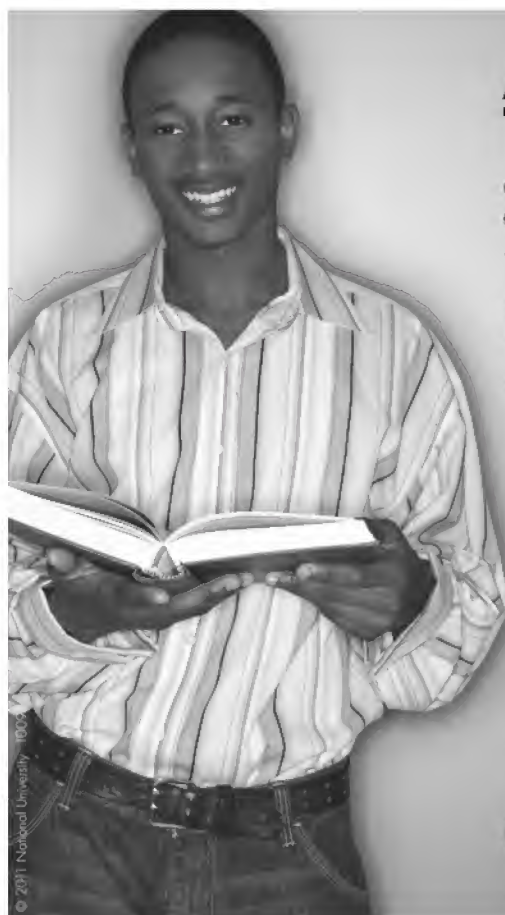
The PARCS (Palo Alto Reality Check Survey) is administered annually to our middle school students in our district. Terman's results have been encouraging, as PARCS data show that student bullying has decreased, and feelings of respect and connectedness have increased.

These results have translated into real student stories:

■ **JL: Becoming more engaged.** JL is a sixth grader who accumulated excessive absences in the first few weeks of school. On several occasions he refused to get out of his car and walk into the school building. The counselor made an initial contact with him, and the principal followed up with the family. They learned that he loves math and science. The counselor worked to establish strong connections with his math/science teacher. The teacher chose to mentor him and support him as he took on additional academic challenges.

He joined science-related lunchtime clubs and even voluntarily took the challenging math test, AMC8. After six months, JL has made friends at school, his attendance has significantly improved, and while there are many steps that we need to take for full engagement, we are well on our way with this student.

■ **CN: New friends and activities.** CN started middle school displaying extreme anxiety around adults and peers. Any expect-



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tations set for her, feedback given, or any transition resulted in her receding into the hood of her jacket and crying. Her grades plummeted during the first quarter of sixth grade. At lunch, we often found her eating alone. We began by establishing connections with her one person at a time while also connecting her with counseling services on campus. The goal was to avoid overwhelming her, given her fragile emotional state.

Her language arts teacher now meets with her weekly at lunch to support her academically and emotionally, and invites other students in the class to join them. CN worked with her grade-level counselor to identify lunchtime clubs she would be interested in attending, and she now has joined the movie club, where she enjoys a non-threatening environment with low-level social interaction. She is thriving in this setting. Not only does she attend regularly, she has made new friends and has lunch with them every day. She is smiling more often and has even asked a question during class, a giant leap forward for her.

Review, reflect and revise

There is no “silver bullet” that will automatically result in school connectedness, and efforts to foster student connectedness to school are never “over.” We must continually review, reflect upon and revise what we are doing in order to meet the unique needs



of each individual student. But when programs and systems are combined with the collective efforts of adults who share the philosophy that we all own all of our children, we can and do foster student connectedness to school. ■

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